

THE GHOST ON THE STAIRS

By Mrs. W. K. Clifford

I



MRS. DAWLEY sat on the sands, leaning a little forward, watching the great waves that came nearer and nearer, foaming and roaring at their highest, then spending themselves on the shore, only to be followed by others that were higher and louder and came nearer still, as if they were trying to force her back, up the steps and along the pathway, to the little house at the end of the terrace in which she lived her secluded life.

She had gone down to the sea, when the early post brought its news, to think the past years over, holding in her hand the while a gold cross on a slender chain which she wore round her neck. It had been given her in Rome some years before, a parting gift from a Catholic friend who was about to take the veil. Concealed in it was a little photograph of Leo XIII. Leo XIII had blessed it, the friend told her, and said: "Wear it day and night; it will keep the Evil One from you." She pressed it against her face now, while gradually she realized what the news meant. Just this, that the man she had loved best in the world was lying dead, not here but in London. She had supposed that all feeling for him had ended, that he was nothing—nothing to her; but those three lines had made her heart leap and then grow cold, as if an icy hand had been laid on it. She had risen to her feet and stood for a moment dazed, then read the notice again, and again, and told herself that it was true—true, he was dead; it was all over, everything in the world was over for him—never, never would she see him again. And O God! dear God, how did it fare with him?

It was impossible to stay in the house; the whole weight of the ceiling, of the roof itself, seemed to be on her head. She dragged herself out, along the garden path, to the road, to the little gate and

down the steps to the bay, which was always deserted in the early morning; it was the one place in which she might be able calmly to think. The sands looked soft and yellow, the sea was blue, the sky was blue, the sunshine was everywhere. The great waves seemed to mock her—all Nature seemed to mock her; she felt afraid and lonely, an alien in the world; for a moment she almost lost count of her own identity and wondered aimlessly how she came there, and thought again of the man she had loved. He was lying dead. She imagined his face, and wondered if he had thought of her in that last hour, and if he had known that the end was coming.

She had been married to him when she was twenty-two. He was infatuated with her for three weeks before he proposed and for a hurrying month after he was accepted, well content for half a year of marriage. Then he cooled down. He was incapable of being constant to any one woman long, and rather despised the men who were; he thought it showed a lack of enterprise and too much satisfaction with existing conditions which, he told her with a laugh, he held to be fatal to the advancement of the world in general and the exhilaration of man in particular. Two years later she had divorced him and was living alone at St. Ives. For a time she was utterly miserable; then the thought of the other woman, of his desertion—his desertion for that woman!—had filled her with a shivering anger and repulsion. She imagined that she had learned to hate him. Now it was all swept away, and she thought of the day she had met him first, of the mad infatuation on his part and her own calmer, deeper love for him: it struggled to come back, and the tones of his voice, the sound of his laughter, filled her ears.

The waves frightened her; they seemed to know—they did know—she felt it, heard it; they came nearer and nearer with their message. They drove her at last into her own room to lie face downward on the

bed and think. Lionel was dead, and the other woman had watched beside him. What could he have seen in *her*, "a free lance" she had been called, probably because she lived alone, smoked—and drank too much, it was said—painted little daubs of pictures, and had a studio at Chelsea to which she gathered a Bohemian godless set?

Those last two words made Edith Dawley stop and shiver again. She was a religious woman, and she didn't believe that a serious thought had entered his heart or brain since the day he made his marriage vows only to break them. She had talked to him of their solemnity once. He had looked rather amused and said: "All right, my dear. I don't believe in hell, you know, and if there is one I don't expect it's such a bad place, after all." Now perhaps he was standing at the bar waiting for judgment. How had he lived these last few years? How had he died? Had any one prayed beside him when he was ill? Did any one kneel by him now that he was dead? The old tenderness had stolen back into her heart, but with it there came a paralyzing fear, an awful dread.

She looked at *The Times* again—on the 8th. This was the 10th. He was probably lying in the front room over the first floor in Connaught Square, the house he had removed to after the divorce. She felt that she would give everything she possessed to see him once again, to see his dead face—even to be near the house in which he lay still and cold would be something.

She got up, hesitated, and with weary eyes looked round the room, then took a time-table from a little shelf over the bureau in the corner. The London train started at 10.25—three-quarters of an hour hence. As if at the bidding of a dream, she put on a long black cloak and hat, tied a thick veil over her face, gathered a few things into a hand-bag, and with a word or two of explanation to the solitary servant went down to the station.

A long, weary day. The train stopped at all the little Cornish places. Despairingly she stared at them, at the station-master gossiping with the guard, at the few passengers, country folk mostly, carrying baskets or bags, leisurely taking leave of those who had come to see them off.

The start again was slow and reluctant; but after Plymouth the engine seemed to shake itself free and rushed on, the carriages rocking with relief behind it. Across the quiet west country, past sleepy villages and their blurred name-boards at the stations, till with a shriek of exultation they were in sight of Exeter—the platform was crowded with people, but the train only gathered speed as if to avoid some signal that might delay it.

All the time in her thoughts she followed a scared and silent procession of men and women who went through the gate of the world and on in the mist and blackness toward a shining road—for the stars were its landmarks—and a distance that was saturated with light and mystery. Away from it stretched a pathway, dark and dank it looked, darker—darker till blackness hid it. She shuddered with dread as they came near and went past her—the ghostly men and women. She could see them plainly. Their worn faces were marked with care and pain and remembered deeds; their shadowy robes and outstretched hands would have touched her but for the screening glass; she watched their noiseless feet, that had not power to hesitate or stop, going on—and on. O merciful God, was Lionel among them! And what would be his sentence when it was given out? Which way would *his* feet turn? Suddenly she remembered being told that the Semitic races believed the soul did not leave the body till the third day. Perhaps even yet there was time! With her whole heart, with passionate intensity, she prayed—as she sat there silent, motionless, in the railway carriage—pleading his carelessness, his charm and good nature, his lack of strength to do right and of intention to do wrong; and his happy generosity, for he had given all he possessed carelessly enough.

She arrived at Paddington in the evening and waited till the twilight came. Then, leaving her hand-bag in the cloak-room, she put down her veil and walked slowly to Connaught Square. It was just a little way—she knew the house well, for long ago she had gone to parties next door to it.

The blinds were down; there were lights in the dining-room; probably she—the

other woman—was having dinner. Edith Dawley shrank back, and drawing her cloak round her walked by on the other side and looked up. The windows were open a little way in the room over the drawing-room. It was as she thought . . . While she hesitated at the corner a servant opened the door and whistled for a cab. A woman came out and drove away—the woman who had supplanted her. And the dead man was left in the house. If only she could get in and see his face once more? But she had no courage to knock, no excuse to give. She walked round the square again, the shadows of the calm night hesitated to shroud it, but gradually they were blurring and hiding and beautifying everything with their grayness. As she drew near the house again a postman went there and knocked twice; she was ten yards off, she saw him give in a letter and a paper which the servant, leaving the door open, evidently went away to sign. Without considering what she was doing, she went up the steps and entered the house. The postman, seeing her blackness, thought she belonged to it; the servant had not returned.

She went softly up-stairs to the room, the electric light had not been turned on, but enough twilight lingered to let her see the way. The door was locked, but the key was there; she turned it and went in. It felt very still and cold and everything was white: the whiteness showed plainly through the gathering darkness. Between the windows she could see dimly that for which she was seeking. For a moment she shuddered and hesitated. On a little table outside she had vaguely noticed a candlestick and a box of matches; she went back for the matches, took them into the room and shut the door. For a moment she stood still, while gradually the room revealed itself to her and the silence struck icily at her heart; a sheet was over him; she drew it back and softly lit a match, shielding it with her figure so that its radiance might not fall on the door and show from without. Then she saw his face. It was grave and very sad—she felt her whole being reach out to him with

yearning love, with pity and dread. O God, what did his closed eyes see—what was he hearing—what surprise had come to him? She lighted another match, carefully smothering the little sound its striking made. Another long look, an unconscious entreaty to all the unknown Immensities—then with her left hand she pulled the gold cross from her neck and pushed it into the white folds next his heart. "If it's true what they believe," she thought, "it will help—it will bar the downward way." She drew the sheet back over his face. The ends of the matches were in her hands; she clutched them tightly; the last one burned her palm, but she did not even feel it.

The closed door was between them again; she turned the key and, keenly listening with the sense of a hunted woman leaving forever all that was left of what had once been dearest life, she went slowly down.

There was no light on the staircase, but as she passed the first floor she could see that a door was open; the room beyond was still and dark; her dress made a little swishing sound against the banister—a smothered cry—a sound of fright within the drawing-room—a movement and then a halt from sheer horror—she knew it was her chance and quickened her steps. In a minute she was at the street door; she closed it noiselessly, but a scream met her ears—the sudden isolated scream of fear. Luckily the house was near a corner; she turned it and disappeared.

She went back to Cornwall by the night mail, desolate, miserable, but shiveringly, shudderingly thankful. "It will bar the way," she said to herself again and again; "perhaps I have done that for him." In the darkness without the faces of thwarted fiends shaped themselves and pressed against the windows; they mocked and mouthed at her; she covered her face with her hands. . . .

Three months later, in a letter from a friend, she heard that the house in Connaught Square was empty. It was said to be haunted by a woman in black, who, in the twilight, went up and down the staircase.